BUILDING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES (BEST)

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Safe and Healthy Schools
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The Pyramid has been developed by the Vermont Department of Education's BEST (Building Effective Strategies for Teaching Students with Behavioral Challenges) Team. The members of the BEST Team are as follows:

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In June 1998, the Department of Education published "Preventing and Responding to School Disruption and Violence." That report of the Task Force on School Violence is a working document that describes a framework from which schools and communities can build capacity in the area of school discipline. The Pyramid of School Discipline is the first supplement to these guidelines and outlines the components of a comprehensive system of school discipline.

The Pyramid builds on the original report and describes the necessary elements for creating a very high standard of discipline, safety, and positive school climate. In turn, the learning process and all students' social and emotional growth should prosper.

The Pyramid has been developed in response to: teachers who finish their school days with knots in their stomachs from difficulties related to student behavior; administrators who cannot provide adequate leadership because they spend an inordinate amount of time on discipline; and parents who want their children to come home excited about their school day.

Fostering Effective Discipline Involves Overarching Principles
- Teachers must consistently employ proven methods of classroom management and relationship building to prevent and respond to behavior problems and connect with students.
- Although we know that these methods reduce disruptive and dangerous behavior, teachers need a system of support when their skills do not work with particular students.
- Uncertainty about how to respond to any student misconduct must be minimized. Every school should have comprehensive and effective written guidelines for adult intervention.
- Always treat students with dignity.*
- Responsibility and self-discipline are more important than compliance.*
- Model and teach behaviors you expect from students.*
- Make sure discipline strategies are practical.*

What Schools Can Do
To establish and maintain a positive school climate, a school must carefully plan a series of events and activities. Two prerequisites to these efforts are:
- Members of the school community (school board, administrators, parents, students, faculty and other school employees) agree to implement a prevention plan and to take effective, thoughtful, and consistent steps when disruptions occur, aimed at meeting students' and the school's needs.
- Administrators make school discipline a priority.

Getting Started
School improvement in this area is contingent both on an awareness of the problem and a desire to undertake the steps necessary for change. The broader the support for change, the greater the likelihood that the plan will be effective.

Once agreement is reached that change is needed, the principal forms a committee representative of the school community, including parents, teachers, administrators, students, school counselors, nurses, librarians and others. The committee develops a plan, gathers community input and carries out the activities and events planned for in the comprehensive system.

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* Curwin, R.L., & Mendler, A.N. (1988). *Discipline with dignity*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

In many Vermont schools, Educational Support Teams have been established for the purpose of supporting at risk learners. Members of the Educational Support Team should be consulted or directly involved in the planning process. The resulting work should be incorporated into the school's Education Support System and action plans.

Teams that have been successful in guiding change have basic knowledge of effective teamwork, creative problem solving, and an understanding of systemic change. Some schools will require outside resources to guide this change. Others may have staff with the skills and knowledge to act without outside assistance.

The Pyramid of School Discipline
In her book, *Safe Passage* (1998), Joy Dryfoos states, "Parents the world over want assurance that their children will be able to grow into responsible adults who can enter the labor force, become effective parents and participate in the social and political life of the society...What young people really need on a daily basis are safe places, challenging experiences and caring people." These three elements are the supporting walls of the Pyramid and are integral pieces of the whole. We know that actively engaged students, educated in non-threatening and social learning environments, are less likely to exhibit challenging behavior. Students who are supported by nurturing adults are more likely to be connected to positive aspects of school culture and that relationships and achievement are fostered in safe settings. We believe that these foundations profoundly influence effective and supportive schoolwide discipline systems and at the same time, play a significant role in their realization.

To create an effective discipline system, all nine levels of the Pyramid should be taken into account. Omitting any level may lead to flaws in the overall system. Schools can use this guide to develop and implement each level in ways that reflect the developmental needs of their students and the school's unique characteristics.

The Pyramid

Positive
Challenging
Experiences

Individual Plans

Guidelines for Major Misconduct

Crisis Support Team

Out-of-Classroom Spaces

Script

Staff Development

Rules for Specific Environments (classrooms, bus, playground, etc.)

Schoolwide Rules

Schoolwide and Community Discipline Philosophy

Safe
Schools

Caring People

1. Creating a Discipline Philosophy and Defining A School's Values

Without a basic discipline philosophy or explicitly stated values to guide them when disagreements arise, schools are adrift and unable to resolve conflicts. The philosophy or value statements, written by the committee, are developed with input from a cross-section of the school community. Faculty gatherings, student council meetings and community forums are fertile ground for gathering ideas. Once the committee has put the philosophy on paper, it should be reviewed and endorsed by the school board and representative groups in the community.

Statements taken from various school discipline philosophies include the following elements:
- Discipline must preserve the dignity of all involved.
- Belonging, mastery, independence and generosity are attributes that promote high standards.
- Students are responsible for their actions and must be clearly informed of the consequences of both positive and negative behavior.
- The aim of school discipline is to foster within students the essential internal controls to navigate the school day successfully, thus making the "discipline system" invisible.
- Parents play a primary role in making the system work.
- Discipline is a set of skills that all students can learn and use independently to help them become responsible members of the school community.

2. Essential Schoolwide Discipline Rules

Since students must be accountable for their behavior, there should be a clear set of schoolwide rules. These rules establish a standard of behavior expected from all members of the community.

They guide the establishment of additional rules for each school environment. They are positively phrased and flow directly from the school's philosophy of discipline or values statement. Some Vermont supervisory unions have developed the same philosophy and school rules for elementary, middle and high school; the language differs according to the developmental level of students. School rules should be posted throughout the school.

Many schools, with input from students, incorporate the following principles in the development of schoolwide rules:
- Emotional safety for all
- Physical safety for all
- Respect for property
- Responsibility for attendance, work completion, and cooperation in the classroom and other school environments

3. Rules for Specific Areas (classroom, gym, auditorium, cafeteria, playground, bus, etc.) Consistent with schoolwide rules, each teacher, bus driver, librarian, and others, along with students, should establish four or five rules for his or her classroom or setting. These rules can be written on the first day of school, will need to be reviewed regularly, and should be prominently displayed.

4. Staff Development: Conflict Cycle, Prevention and De-escalation Strategies **
When a student violates school rules, the staff member should use a set of skills and procedures designed to guide the student quickly and efficiently back to task. This approach helps the student make a choice with clear and consistently utilized teacher responses. These responses include:
- Positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior
- Supportive guidance for returning to task or choice of appropriate alternative activity
- Removal from the class for behavior or conduct that conflicts with the rules (see section 6, page 6, for a range of removal options)
- Immediate administrative involvement for major misconduct (see section 8, page 7)
- Responsibility for completion of missed work or a mutually agreed upon alternative
- Restitution for damage

To prevent and mediate conflict in the classroom, teachers and other school employees should receive training*** in the following areas:
- Understanding and applying the school's discipline philosophy, procedures and practices
- Understanding the relationship of needs to behavior
- Distinguishing punishment from discipline and responsibility
- Application of social skills training across the curriculum
- Principles of behavior management; "The Conflict Cycle," understanding and preventing teacher-student conflicts, and other anger management strategies

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** "Preventing and Responding to School Disruption and Violence" Department of Education, State of Vermont 1998
*** "Preventing and Responding to School Disruption and Violence" Department of Education, State of Vermont 1998

5. The Script
In spite of the best efforts of school staff, misconduct and disruption will occur. In these situations, a consistently employed script leads the disruptive student to make a choice to stop the disruptive behavior, make an acceptable alternative choice or be removed to another setting. For younger students, this may be in the classroom; for older students, it often requires another location in the school.

Using the script is a way for the adult to inform the student that: reasonable yet unsuccessful attempts have been made to guide the student back to task; current behavior is preventing him/her and others from benefiting from classroom activities; and, the student cannot remain in the current setting. Using this procedure will not result in long-term behavior change and may lead to an escalation of the immediate conflict. To be effective, the script must be used consistently in times of conflict and combined with ongoing efforts to address the student's needs.

With guidance and counseling, students should be encouraged to understand their self-defeating patterns of behavior and taught to substitute effective pro-social alternative behavior. Concurrently, school staff should examine the effectiveness of this strategy with particular students and seek to understand the factors that led to the particular student conflict, including their own behavior patterns.

The script contains three questions for the disruptive student.

Questions Expected	Student Response
What are you doing?	Objectively describes the rule-breaking behavior
What are you supposed to be doing?	Clarifies that the student knows what behavior or task is expected
What are you going to do?	The student makes a choice communicated by either words or actions

The script generally takes no more than 30 seconds and is not a negotiation. Sometimes it will be appropriate to ask the student, "What can I do to help you make a good choice?" or "How is your behavior affecting others?" The script is designed to guide the student back to task or to another appropriate choice.

If the student continues the rule-breaking behavior, s/he must leave the current activity. For younger students, this might mean putting their heads down on the desk or sitting in a quiet corner of the classroom. For older students, leaving the classroom may be necessary.

Removal at this step is not punishment. It carries no further negative consequences and should last only as long as it takes for the student to agree to return to class and participate appropriately in the activity. As a natural consequence of this "antiseptic bouncing" (Fritz Redl), the student should be given the opportunity to make up missed work or to engage in a mutually acceptable alternative. If appropriate, the student should provide restitution to other students or adults affected by his or her behavior (e.g., a sincere apology may be sufficient).

6. Out-of-Classroom Spaces

It is essential in a comprehensive system of a school discipline to establish safe and separate locations to which a student goes as a result of his/her disruptive behavior.

Time-Out /Away and Planning Rooms

When a student, despite the use of the script, persists in his/ her misconduct or disruption, s/he must be moved to a time-out or planning room. Removal from the positively reinforcing setting, such as the classroom, is not intended as a punishing reaction to misbehavior, but a consequence of the misbehavior with the goal of returning the student as quickly as possible. Time-out /away differs from planning rooms and both are part of a comprehensive system. In some schools, the time-out and planning room are located together, while in others they are separate.

- A time-out space is where a student chooses to go or is sent, is not reinforcing, and is intended to be used by the student to reflect on what just occurred and decide on a course of action. It is a time and place for the student to calm down so that s/he can exercise rational judgment as to his/her behavior. The student returns to class as quickly as possible. Trained adults always monitor time-out rooms.
- When a student is unable to independently choose an appropriate course of action, time-out/away may not resolve the conflict. A planning room is a location in which a trained adult helps the student process the events that led to his or her removal and helps develop a plan for a successful reintegration to the class.

In-School Suspension

Following major misconduct, in-school suspension is a place to which the student goes for a predetermined amount of time. The school administration is involved in this decision and parents or guardians are notified. The student is expected to complete class work during in-school suspension. In-school suspension may be useful for practicing positive social skills and for developing a plan for meaningful restitution.

Schools have addressed the need for out-of-classroom locations in creative ways. Once established, they serve a critical role in a school's discipline system.

7. School Based Crisis Support Team

Every school needs a crisis support team. This is a group of highly trained individuals who can respond adequately to any behavior-related crisis during the school day. For smaller schools, this group may be comprised of two or three individuals. In large schools, six to ten may be necessary. These teams respond to crises ranging from severe student disruption to violent misconduct. Crisis support team members volunteer for participation and have skills in the following areas:

- De-escalation strategies
- Short-term counseling techniques ("Life Space Crisis Intervention," Dr. Nicholas Long)
- Mediation skills
- Safe physical restraint

A crisis support team should respond within one minute. Schools use a variety of communication strategies to ensure immediate notification of crises during the school day.

8. Guidelines for Major Misconduct

All schools should develop a finite list of dangerous student actions for which there must be zero tolerance. These infractions are in the following categories:

- Weapons possession, threat to use, or actual use
- Drugs and alcohol possession or use
- Serious verbal aggressions, harassment or threat
- Serious damage to property
- Serious physical altercations
- Chronic violation of school or class rules

Dealing with these behaviors is the responsibility of the administration and results in individually-determined consequences that will include at least one of the following:

- Interagency referral and planning
- Home/school coordination and support
- Restitution
- Short-term suspension (in or out of school)
- Long-term suspension
- Expulsion

Unless they are prevented by an emergency, immediate parental notification and legal due process should precede disciplinary actions for major infractions. In many instances, these infractions are criminal and require police notification. Social and Rehabilitative Services (SRS) and Community Mental Health Centers can also serve as partners in helping schools work effectively with individual students and their families.

9. Individual Behavior Planning

A small percentage of students require individual plans that build on the discipline system. These are students who chronically violate school rules and for whom the system appears ineffective. Schools will need to rely on skilled individuals in creating these plans. They need frequent assessment and a team approach for successful implementation. In extreme situations, consideration is given to placement in an alternative educational setting for an extended period of time. Alternative settings include:

- Special class
- Special day school
- Residential school
- Home or hospital setting

Conclusion

Implementation of this comprehensive, flexible system should provide consistent, effective responses to a range of disruptive and dangerous behaviors. If the system is designed and implemented well, it will help shape and sustain schools that recognize the value of caring people, challenging educational experiences and safety for all. Such an environment fosters the highest standards of education for all students.